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# Daniel Webster

## The Orator

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BOSTON.

# Daniel Webster
## The Orator

An Address delivered before the Brooklyn Institute
of Arts and Sciences and the New England
Society of Brooklyn

By Albert E. Pillsbury

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# Daniel Webster, the Orator.

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In one of his most famous speeches, Webster paid this eloquent tribute to Samuel Dexter, in which the speaker stands unconsciously revealed : —

" He was a lawyer, and he was also a statesman. He had studied the constitution that he might defend it. He had examined its principles that he might maintain them. More than all men, or at least as much as any man, he was attached to the general government and to the union of the states. His feelings and opinions all ran in that direction. A question of constitutional law was, of all subjects, that one which was best suited to his talents and learning. Aloof from technicalities and unfettered by artificial rules, such a question gave opportunity for that deep and clear analysis, that mighty grasp of principle, which so much distinguished his higher efforts. His very statement was argument. His inference seemed demonstration. The earnestness of his own conviction wrought conviction in others. One was convinced and believed and assented because it was gratifying, delightful, to think, to feel and believe, in unison with an intellect of such evident superiority."

It is Webster himself, the orator, lawyer, and statesman, who is here painted by his own hand in a portrait for which Dexter sat, but of which none but Webster could fill the outlines. We are to look at Webster the orator. It is the most attractive if not the most important character in which he appeared. Webster's greatest power was the power of

speech. As an orator he won his highest triumphs, and as an orator he will be longest remembered. His pre-eminence as a lawyer and statesman was largely due to his surpassing powers of clear, eloquent, and convincing statement. There were other lawyers of his time who had more learning of the books, and a few who were quite his equals in comprehensive grasp of legal principles. There were statesmen who had more qualities of leadership, more organizing and constructive power, more depth and permanence of conviction. As a consummate master of speech, Webster is without a rival in our history, if he has a superior in the history of eloquence.

Half a century has now passed since Webster's death, and threescore and ten years since he reached the summit of his powers. The atmosphere is cleared of the incense of praise and the mists of detraction which rose about him in his own time. His contemporaries have disappeared, and the memory of the greatest of them is fading. Historic events have intervened, of the utmost importance, almost transforming the character of the government. Another generation of statesmen has appeared, done its work, and passed away. That Webster is still among the first in interest of all our great characters is striking evidence of the permanent hold which he took upon his countrymen. The great political changes which have befallen since his day, so far from obliterating his memory, have helped to preserve it; for in every one of them his influence was felt and his authority invoked, as it is invoked to-day, even by those who would pervert it. The new procession of historic figures which has passed across the national stage has hardly crowded him from the central place. The reason is not far to seek. Webster stamped himself indelibly upon the American mind. To an extent of which we are not always conscious, he wove himself into the very fabric of the government. His word directed the course of the public thought on national topics. His great speeches be-

came part of our history, our literature, our constitutional law, almost of our national existence.

Webster was a product of nature. The schools and society added little to him. The unpeopled wilderness in which he was born and grew up permeated his character and was reflected in his mind. His native spot was on the frontier of the New Hampshire settlements, where his earliest associations were among trackless forests, rivers, lakes, and mountains, the vast sublimity of primitive nature. He was a delicate child, with a large head, coal-black hair, great black eyes, which none who saw them ever forgot, and a complexion so swarthy that they called him "little black Dan." In some notes of his life he says, "Two things I did dearly love,— reading and playing." Being much fonder of these than of hard work, he was of little use on the farm. An elder brother facetiously said that Dan was sent to school "to make him equal to the other boys." In truth, however, physical weakness and intellectual promise together devoted him to an education which his parents could ill afford to bestow, with results that greatly repaid the sacrifice.

His mind was attuned in childhood to the dominant note of his life. Webster's character centred in devotion to the Union,—a devotion amounting to passion. Born in January, 1782, he was in his seventh year when the Federal constitution was before the people for adoption. It was the theme of all tongues. Webster's father, a man of marked character, a captain in the French war and in the Revolution, personally known and trusted by Washington, and of rank and influence among his neighbors, was an ardent advocate of the constitution and a member of the New Hampshire convention which made its ratification complete. The household and neighborhood talk about the constitution was among little Dan's earliest recollections. One of his first possessions was a cotton handkerchief on which the instrument was

printed at large, where he first read it; and as he told this story, he used to add, "I have known more or less about it ever since." These things became part of the substance of his mind. But the orator was not yet born. As a boy, he could not speak before the school. "Many a piece," he says, "did I commit to memory, and recite and rehearse in my own room over and over again; yet, when the day came, when the school collected to hear declamations, when my name was called, and I saw all eyes turned to my seat, I could not raise myself from it. When the occasion was over, I went home and wept bitter tears of mortification."

It was not until his college days that he discovered his powers of speech. Once awake, they developed so rapidly that before he left Dartmouth his reputation was established as the best speaker in the college. The earliest of his productions remaining is a Fourth of July oration of 1800. He began, as most young men do, by copying the worst faults of his contemporaries; and these youthful excursions are interesting chiefly for the contrast between their stilted and artificial rhetoric and the simplicity, directness, and force with which he spoke only a few years later, when his own genius had begun to assert itself. In the speech of 1800, Columbia appears "in the forum of the nations, and the empires of the world are amazed at the bright effulgence of her glory." Washington is a character who "never groaned but when fair Freedom bled." On a similar occasion in 1802, he pictures America before the Revolution as confronted with "the frightful form of Despotism, clad in iron robes, reclined on a heap of ruins; in his left hand taxation — his right grasped the thunders." This is bad enough, but the courts and senates of that day were full of such bombast, and the common people heard it eagerly. Already the constitution is his theme. The sentiments are Webster's own, and are remarkably just and manly for a lad hardly out of his teens.

The style, which is borrowed, gives but little promise that the speaker would live to produce oratory worthy to be compared with the greatest examples of any age.

In college, Webster was more distinguished for general reading and information than for scholarship. The best of his training was derived from the discipline of his nine years at the Portsmouth bar. In that period he developed a severe and unerring taste that rejected from his style of speech the faults of the contemporary school, and prepared him to create a school of his own. In this he was much aided by the chastening influence of Jeremiah Mason, his constant antagonist, a man who rarely uttered an inapt or superfluous word. Webster richly repaid this service. His encomiums have rescued Mason from the oblivion that awaits all mere lawyers, however eminent in their day and generation.

Webster's public life began at a critical time in the affairs of the country. The constitution, "extorted," as John Quincy Adams said, "from the grinding necessity of a reluctant people," had already begun to chafe. The doubts and misgivings with which the people had created a Federal government armed with real powers, had soon developed into open discontent. As early as 1798 the ill-advised alien and sedition laws brought out the first direct menace against the perpetuity of the Union. Before the echo of the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions died away, the embargoes and the war of 1812 swept American commerce from the seas and forced the maritime states into an attitude of hostility to the administration, if not to the government itself, which culminated in the Hartford convention. In the midst of these excitements, Webster made his first entry upon the public stage, as a representative in Congress from his native state of New Hampshire. The very beginning of his public service gave evidence that a new man and a new orator had appeared.

Webster's sympathies were naturally with his neighbors and constituents. He declared the war "an instance of inconceivable folly and desperation," and did not hesitate to denounce the imbecile policy which sought to protect our commerce abroad by destroying it at home. In this situation, at the threshold of his public career, his mettle was put to proof. The war-party in Congress undertook to rebuke him for his hostility to the measures of the administration. We have seen such discipline meekly accepted in our own time, but Webster was not a good subject for it. He turned upon his assailants with this ringing note of defiance: —

"The more I perceive a disposition to check the freedom of inquiry by extravagant and unconstitutional pretences, the firmer shall be the tone in which I shall assert and the freer the manner in which I shall exercise it. It is the ancient and undoubted prerogative of this people to canvass public measures and the merits of public men. It is a 'home-bred right,' a fireside privilege. It has ever been enjoyed in every house, cottage, and cabin in the nation. It is not to be drawn into controversy. It is as undoubted as the right of breathing the air or walking on the earth. Belonging to private life as a right, it belongs to public life as a duty; and it is the last duty which those whose representative I am shall find me to abandon. Aiming at all times to be courteous and temperate in its use, except when the right itself shall be questioned, I shall then carry it to its extent. I shall then place myself upon the extreme boundary of my right, and bid defiance to any arm that would move me from my ground. This high constitutional privilege I shall defend and exercise within this House and without this House, and in all places, in time of war, in time of peace, and at all times."

The spirited vindication of the right of free speech, of which these words are part, unsurpassed in the literature of the race with which free speech had its birth, was Webster's first real service to his country. It deserves to be repro-

duced and remembered whenever and wherever the "right preservative of all rights" is invaded or drawn in question.

In 1818, when Webster was but thirty-six years of age, the famous case of Dartmouth College brought him prominently before the country as a forensic orator of the first rank. His earliest legal argument of national repute showed him to be unrivalled in the power of clear, forcible, and convincing statement in that field. Apart from our constitutional system, of which he was the great master, Webster was never distinguished as a profound or original thinker in the law. He was made for greater things. The legal theory that under the Federal constitution a legislative charter is a contract, beyond impairment by the state, — a conception so bold and original that it struck lawyers and judges with surprise and distrust,— is ascribed to Smith and Mason, Webster's associates before the New Hampshire court, where it was overruled. It fell to Webster to take up the discredited argument, and press it home to conviction upon the national tribunal. In his hands a legal abstraction took on life, and bore down upon a hostile court with irresistible force. The published report, a web of legal reasoning of the closest texture, with hardly a thread of color, does not include the famous peroration. When Webster had apparently finished, he paused for a moment; and then, as if by afterthought, reminding the court that its judgment might destroy the feeble institution in whose behalf he spoke, he said, "It is, sir, as I have said, a small college — and yet there are those who love it." Here his voice broke, and his eyes filled with tears. Recovering his composure, after a moment of breathless silence he proceeded, in a deep and thrilling tone that went to the heart of his audience, "Sir, I know not how others may feel; but for myself, when I see my *alma mater* surrounded, like Cæsar in the senate-house, by those who are reiterating stab after stab, I would not for

this right hand have her turn to me, and say, *Et tu quoque, mi fili!* — and thou, too, my son!"

The Dartmouth College argument was a great triumph of forensic speech, and marked an epoch in judicial advocacy. It carried an unwilling court to the support of a doubtful principle, and at once gave Webster the place that Pinkney had held at the head of the American bar.

We next see Webster winning fresh laurels in a new and different field. At the celebration at Plymouth, in 1820, of the two-hundredth anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, he pronounced an oration which at once took rank as the greatest of its kind in American history,— a rank which it has held against all efforts but his own. It is especially distinguished by a noble passage in denunciation of the slave-trade, in which the generous instincts of this native son of liberty broke out in a burst of impassioned invective, delivered, as Mr. Ticknor said, "with a power of indignation which I never witnessed on any other occasion. He seemed like the mountain that might not be touched, and that burned with fire." More familiar is the famous apostrophe, declaimed by every school-boy, "Advance, then, ye future generations," spoken, according to the same hearer, "with a smile of most attractive sweetness, and arms extended, as though he would embrace them."

The Plymouth oration first displayed Webster's genius for the highest expression of reason and patriotism on great public occasions. The profound impression which it made upon the country was not alone due to its beauty of style or elevation of tone. His real theme was the origin and destiny of the American nation. It was here that Webster began his great work of creating a national spirit among the people of the states,— a work never laid down but with his life.

This oration left Webster without a rival in the field of occasional oratory. When the corner-stone of the monument

was to be laid at Bunker Hill, in 1825, on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, all eyes turned to him as the spokesman of the occasion. It was an international event. The presence of Lafayette, and of the survivors of the battle, gave to the celebration a peculiar and solemn interest. It was as though the scroll of time had been unrolled, and the people communed with the fathers face to face. The great opportunity was greatly availed of. Webster pronounced a splendid oration before a vast throng of people, all of whom, it is said, were able to hear him. He was audible at a great distance, without apparent effort, in virtue of the carrying quality of his voice, not naturally deep but a resonant baritone, flexible and of great compass. An incident of the occasion illustrates his command over men. In the midst of the oration the platform from which he spoke gave way, and the crowd began to break in panic. "It is impossible to restore order," said one of the managers. "Nothing is impossible, sir," rejoined Webster; and then, raising his hand with his most imperial air, "Let there be order, at once" — and in a moment the multitude was quiet.

The Bunker Hill oration was largely composed, as Webster afterward admitted, while he was fishing for trout in Mashpee brook. Standing middle-deep in the water, paying no attention to his rod and line, the oblivious angler was heard by a companion to burst out with the famous apostrophe,— "Venerable men, you have come down to us from a former generation." The companion was his son Fletcher, and there are many jocose allusions to this incident in their correspondence.

A year later Webster crowned his fame as an occasional orator with the eulogy on Adams and Jefferson. The death of these two illustrious Americans, the last survivors of the great men of the Revolution, almost at the same hour of the same day, and that day the fiftieth anniversary of the great

event with which their names are forever bound up, aroused the popular emotion to a degree unparalleled since the death of Washington. The eulogy was spoken in Faneuil Hall, shrouded for the first time in mourning. The eager crowd that surged about the building broke down a door and swarmed into the hall; and here again the compelling power of the orator had to be invoked to quiet the tumult, which he did by ordering all the doors opened. We have this picture of Webster as he appeared on the occasion: —

"Mr. Webster spoke in an orator's gown, and wore small-clothes. He was in the perfection of his manly beauty and strength; his form filled out to its finest proportions, and his bearing, as he stood before the vast multitude, that of absolute dignity and power. His manuscript lay on a small table near him, but he did not refer to it. His manner of speaking was deliberate and commanding. When he came to the passage on eloquence, and to the words, 'it is action, noble, sublime, godlike action,' he stamped his foot repeatedly on the stage, his form seemed to dilate, and he stood the personification of what he so perfectly described."

As pure literature, some parts of this oration will probably survive as long as anything produced by Webster; perhaps as long as the language in which they were spoken. In the interpolated "sink or swim" speech, ascribed to John Adams on the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, so perfectly did Webster's genius reproduce the man and the occasion that it was long and persistently believed to be a speech actually delivered by Adams himself,— an impression which Webster twenty years later had not been able to correct. The Adams speech was an afterthought, written when the oration was substantially completed, on the morning before its delivery. A friend who called on Webster found him pacing the room in excitement, his face wet with tears; and to him

Webster repeated the speech, and asked his opinion upon it, saying that he had just written it, and was "uncertain whether it was the best or the worst part of the discourse." He was not left long in doubt. It is one of the most striking, and perhaps the most familiar, of all Webster's public utterances. What if such a voice had spoken to the men of the Revolution in their own time?

These three great addresses passed at once into the national literature. As productions of occasional oratory, they were never afterward equalled even by Webster himself; and they have held the first place against all others in the history of American eloquence.

When Webster entered the Senate, in 1827, at the age of forty-five years, he was near the zenith of his fame. Hardly more than two years after he appeared there, the occasion arose which opened the way to his greatest public service and the crowning triumph of his life. A cloud arose out of the South that threatened the safety of the Union. Under the lead of Calhoun, it was proclaimed that the states are to judge of the extent of Federal power, with the right to resist it if exceeded. This was nullification. It aroused no discussion in Congress until a year later, when an insignificant resolution touching the sale of public lands became the occasion of a debate which went to the foundations of the government. The discussion proceeded for some days without a word from Webster, until Hayne's attack on New England drew out a brief reply, in which Webster did little more than to repel what he regarded as an unwarrantable attempt to excite sectional feeling. Hayne returned to the assault in a brilliant, effective, and, as many thought, unanswerable speech, in which he made the fatal mistake of taunting Webster with trying to avoid Benton by selecting a weaker antagonist; though the truth was that Webster, being engaged in the supreme court, had not heard Benton's speech. This taunt

roused the lion. Webster was naturally lethargic, and his powers were never fully brought into action except under the strongest pressure; but he rarely overlooked a personal attack. He had a royal pride, that brooked no infringement of the prerogative. The caustic and not wholly groundless criticism of Hayne, at once upon New England and upon himself, stirred him to his depths; and he seems then first to have awakened to the real importance of the occasion. Webster afterward declared this debate "a matter of accident," and it may be that only the sting of Hayne's sarcasm brought him into the fray. On such trivial causes do great events sometimes turn. The situation was without precedent in the history of the country. An issue was fairly presented which involved the integrity, if not the existence, of the government. From contemporary accounts it would appear that the popular excitement, both north and south, was intense, and that Washington was full of distinguished visitors, attracted by the progress of the debate and the momentous importance of the consequences. Some pictures of the scene are probably overdrawn, though Webster afterward said, "I never before spoke in the hearing of an audience so excited, so eager, and so sympathetic." The senate sat in the small chamber now occupied by the supreme court; and the actual audience must have been limited to a few hundreds. But no space could measure and no walls confine the greatness of the occasion or the genius that availed of it. The breathless expectation, as Webster rose to speak, was answered with his first words. The famous exordium of the tempest-tossed mariner, is a masterly stroke of oratorical genius. He instantly riveted the attention of the eager assembly; and after the opening note no doubt remained that the speaker was master of the occasion. He moved with conscious power from one position to another, in irresistible sequence, and with a force that swept all obstacles from his path; and when he finished

there remained of the stronghold of nullification not one stone upon another. The integrity of the Union was at once and forever vindicated.

The speech is known by heart. It is by universal consent the greatest example of parliamentary eloquence in our history, and the crowning achievement of Webster's genius in that field. It was more than a personal or political triumph. It rarely falls to the lot of an orator to see his speech take rank as a great national event, yet so it was with Webster. The reply to Hayne proved to be a turning-point in our history. It went home to the people with irresistible conviction. The national spirit awoke; and the constitution stood upon its feet, a thing of life and power. In the supreme court, Marshall had already cemented the foundations of a permanent government. The reply to Hayne crowned the work, and left the Union indestructible.

The notes from which Webster spoke were made, on a few sheets of paper, during the preceding night, when tradition says his anxious friends were hanging about him, alarmed by his seeming indifference. But his whole life had been a preparation for this event, and he was serenely conscious of his power. To one who ventured to ask him whether he felt confident that he could answer Hayne, he rejoined: "Answer him? I'll *grind* him finer than snuff."

The great service which Webster rendered to the country in the reply to Hayne was consummated two years later, when Calhoun, a man of a very different order, put forth his utmost powers in a supreme effort to rehabilitate the right of nullification. It remained for Webster to unhorse the great champion. No other could have entered the lists against him. The reply to Calhoun is probably the most powerful piece of reasoning in our parliamentary history. It is the apotheosis of pure argument. Without the warmth or color of the reply to Hayne, in force and precision of statement and logical

power it was never excelled even by Webster himself. It was the conclusive and final answer to the claims of the South, and, as the course of history finally proved, left no appeal but to the sword.

In the summer of 1830, but a few months after the greatest of Webster's parliamentary triumphs, he was called to exhibit another side of his manifold genius in his speech for the prosecution in the trial of Francis Knapp for the murder of Captain White, of Salem. This was not like the occasions of national importance to which he was accustomed. The scene was narrow and circumscribed, but in Webster's hands the subject took on a character greater than the occasion. The speech against Knapp is like the outlines of a great drama, having the human passions for its theme. The atrocity of the crime aroused an unparalleled excitement. The murder was projected by the Knapps, but was actually done by Crowninshield, who had committed suicide while awaiting trial. Webster was brought into the prosecution to convince the jury, upon insufficient evidence, that Knapp was guilty as a principal in the murder. No power less than his would have been equal to the task. The first attempt failed, and Webster was then aroused to put forth all his strength. In the meagre report of his speech at the first trial are found only the germs of the mighty effort that finally swept the jury from its base. It is plain that in the interval the great mind of Webster smouldered with the tragedy, until it finally blazed up in this masterpiece of denunciatory eloquence.

The dramatic power with which he reproduces the very spectacle of the murder is unsurpassed in forensic oratory: —

"The circumstances now clearly in evidence spread out the whole scene before us. Deep sleep had fallen on the destined victim, and on all beneath his roof. A healthful old man, to whom sleep was sweet, the first sound slumbers of

the night held him in their soft but strong embrace. The assassin enters, through the window already prepared, into an unoccupied apartment. With noiseless foot he paces the lonely hall, half lighted by the moon. He winds up the ascent of the stairs, and reaches the door of the chamber. Of this he moves the lock, by soft and continued pressure, till it turns on its hinges. He enters, and beholds his victim before him. The room was uncommonly open to the admission of light. The face of the innocent sleeper was turned from the murderer; and the beams of the moon, resting on the gray locks of his aged temple, shewed him where to strike. The fatal blow is given! and the victim passes, without a struggle or a motion, from the repose of sleep to the repose of death. It is the assassin's purpose to make sure work; and he yet plies the dagger, though it was obvious that life had been destroyed by the blow of the bludgeon. He even raises the aged arm, that he may not fail in his aim at the heart, and replaces it again over the wounds of the poignard! To finish the picture, he explores the wrist for the pulse: he feels it, and ascertains that it beats no longer. It is accomplished. The deed is done. He retreats, retraces his steps to the window, passes out through it, as he came in, and escapes. He has done the murder,—no eye has seen him, no ear has heard him. The secret is his own, and it is safe!"

It was necessary to satisfy the jury that Crowninshield was the murderer, Knapp being charged with aiding and abetting him; and direct evidence that Crowninshield did the deed was wanting. Thereupon Webster, spurning argument from beneath him, strips the veil from the suicide's soul, and laying it bare to the jury, by a lightning-flash of genius shows the guilt confessed.

"The secret which the murderer possesses soon comes to possess him; and, like the evil spirits of which we read, it overcomes him, and leads him whithersoever it will. He feels it beating at his heart, rising to his throat, and demanding disclosure. He thinks the whole world sees it in his face, reads

it in his eyes, and almost hears its workings in the very silence of his thoughts. It has become his master. It betrays his discretion, it breaks down his courage, it conquers his prudence. When suspicions from without begin to embarrass him, and the net of circumstance to entangle him, the fatal secret struggles with still greater violence to burst forth. It must be confessed, it will be confessed : there is no refuge from confession but suicide,—and suicide *is* confession."

The speech concludes with a lofty appeal to the sense of duty, almost resembling the solemn grandeur of the Hebrew prophets. Rufus Choate, a competent critic, if a partial friend of the orator, declared this effort of Webster superior to the masterpiece of Demosthenes. Erskine, reckoned the most eloquent of English advocates, never approached it. As pure oratory, or as literature, it shows the high-water mark of Webster's genius. Among speeches to the jury, in elevation of thought and beauty and power of expression it stands alone. In dramatic intensity, in profound comprehension and searching analysis of the guilty human passions, it might have been conceived by the mind that produced Macbeth.

With these two triumphs of eloquence, Webster's genius as an orator reached its meridian. He was then in his forty-ninth year. For twenty years longer there was no marked impairment of intellectual power, but the fervor of his eloquence was abated. There are occasional passages in the later speeches which approach his highest level. As a piece of imagery, nothing surpasses the magnificent figure of the power of England, in the speech of 1834 on President Jackson's protest. There are spirited passages in the speeches of the late forties, against the Mexican war and the annexation of Texas, as worthy of remembrance for their sentiments and expression as any utterance of his best days. He denounced "the plain, absolute unconstitutionality and illegality of the attempt of the Executive to enact laws by executive authority in conquered

territories out of the United States," declaring that the power of the president to do this thing depends only on the question, "Does he wear a crown?" He warned the people against the conquest of foreign possessions, poured contempt upon "manifest destiny," and vigorously denounced the "slavish doctrine," as he called it, that Congress should suffer a war policy to be forced upon it by acts of the Executive. For this the war party stigmatized him as a "Mexican." "Names do not terrify me," retorted Webster. Some passages of the Capitol oration of 1851 are worthy of the orator of Plymouth and Bunker Hill. Either of the later speeches would have made the reputation of any other man; but there is none which, as a whole, can be compared with the splendid productions of the earlier period. Webster was no longer young. Toward the end of his life, domestic calamity and the disappointment of his political hopes told visibly upon his health and spirits. As early as 1844 he said, "I am tired of public speaking, and am bringing it to a close." After that day of ill-omen, the 7th of March, 1850, before which every friend of Webster's memory would draw the veil, the man and the orator were changed. The transcendent genius passed into eclipse. From this time, though he spoke much and eagerly in the attempt to stay the tide of censure now running heavily against him, his tongue drips gall and wormwood, and his style is disfigured by unaccustomed arrogance and vituperation. The 7th of March speech is a great example of intellectual power, but it is not the Webster who fronted nullification in 1830. Devoted as he was to the Union, Webster must have seen and felt that the compromise of 1850 was an unnatural truce, between elements of irresistible repugnance, a mixture of fire and nitre, bound to destroy itself if not the Union which it was designed to save. Looking at the 7th of March speech as an example of oratory, apart from its political character, it is plain, while

Webster's intellect responded to the call, that the vital spark did not kindle within him.

Webster's personal character was a singular mixture of strength and weakness. His celestial fire tempered very common clay. He had a generous nature, and loved his family, kindred and friends with a great affection. His heart melted and poured itself out in passionate grief at the death of wife and children. Yet he was a "good hater," and cherished deep and lasting resentments: —

> "Lofty and sour to them that loved him not,
> But, to those men that sought him, sweet as summer."

He chafed under the labors and restraints of public life, always longing to get back to the quiet seclusion of his seaside home at Marshfield. He was an enthusiastic farmer and a keen sportsman, alike with rod and gun. Rural pursuits were his delight, sweeter to him than professional triumphs or public distinctions, which he found empty of satisfaction. Almost in his last year he said: "I have spent my life in law and politics. Law is uncertain, and politics utterly vain." His heart was out of doors, with nature, with the companions of his rural sports and pursuits, his farmers, his fishermen, his oxen and horses, always the special objects of his affection. He had the abounding animal spirits which go to the natural equipment of the orator. He was full of humor, and when alone with his family or friends, sportive and even frolicsome. He was an early riser; and one of his commonest antics was to go through the house at daybreak, arousing the inmates with his shouting. This great character was even known to indulge his exuberance of spirits by capering and dancing about the room. He sang at his work. Without much ear for music, he was very fond of this diversion, and after an unusually discordant outburst would say, with his gravest expression, "If there is any one thing I fully understand, it is sing-

ing." His open-handed generosity betrayed him into the faults which often hang upon that virtue. He was profuse in hospitality, lavish in expenditure, scattering money with both hands when he had it, and borrowing more readily than he repaid. The people demanded the services which otherwise would have been rewarded with the largest professional income of his time; and he allowed this sacrifice to be partly recompensed by contributions of bankers and merchants, his constituents, friends, and admirers. To become the pensioner of men whose interests might be affected by his public action was an error which brought censure upon him in his own time and has permanently marred his reputation. Yet there is no reason to believe that it ever affected his public conduct. Not only was he superior to such influences, but the very faults of his character were a defence against them. This great man was singularly insensible to money obligations. Toward the end of his life he felt the longing to be free of debt. It is pathetic to see him, in his seventieth and last year, overtasking his strength to undertake a difficult case, in a distant city, under temptation of a large fee, and anxiously calculating with a friend whether life and health enough remained to enable him, by earning a few more such fees, to die, as he said, "a free man." The hope was never realized.

Nature moulded Webster for a great orator. His physical endowments were superb. A stately and commanding figure, crowned by a great leonine head; an "amorphous crag-like face," as Carlyle called it; a lofty brow towering above the craters of his cavernous eyes; an aspect changing under the play of emotion from smiles of irresistible sweetness, revealing teeth "white as a hound's," to a portentous darkness which seemed to shade the landscape; a rich and resonant voice, of great variety and compass,— united to make

> "A combination, and a form, indeed,
> Where every god did seem to set his seal."

He was superior to ridicule, and caricature rarely tried its hand upon him. Nothing like the impression which he made on all about him is known to our generation. Power seemed to radiate from him. He was called "the godlike Daniel," and so he appeared. "Webster must be a charlatan," said an eminent Englishman who met him in 1839: "no man can be so great as he looks." In his presence other men stood mute, as though under a spell. In London, where he was personally unknown, the people turned to look after him in the streets, as they always did at home. He seemed to tower with the front of Jove; and yet the godlike Daniel was considerably under six feet in height, and it is said that he never weighed two hundred pounds. The majesty of his figure and presence was no illusion, but it was not in his physical stature. The power that moved men was within him.

Great orators, more than any other men except great soldiers, have always commanded the public admiration. To the genius that plays upon the human feelings and passions by the power of speech, the nature of man never fails to respond. The orator brings the people face to face with the living embodiment of genius; the highest combination of the power of thought with the power of action. The magnetism of a commanding figure, animated with conceptions breaking into eloquent expression, takes hold irresistibly upon the imagination and the passions, moving even dull and stolid men to excitement and action, as the harp of Orpheus moved the beasts and the rocks. In a popular government, always influenced and sometimes controlled by public speech, eloquence is a direct source of political power, often elevating to high places men who have no other title to popular favor. Under the orator's spell, men often follow him blindly, with unreasoning personal devotion. No man of his time except Clay had more of this following than Webster. Yet the current of popular admiration did not carry either of these great men into

the presidency, the haven of his hopes. One reason, among many, is that the public confidence does not always follow the public applause.

In assigning to Webster his rank among the great orators of the world, he has been compared with Cicero and Demosthenes, with Burke, Chatham, Fox, and Erskine, and with all the great Americans. Among Webster's contemporaries, none but Clay and Calhoun in the senate, and Pinkney and Choate at the bar, can be classed with him. Clay's power to sway a popular audience was probably greater than Webster's, but most of his oratory perished with the occasion. His greatest speeches are now unread, and likely soon to be forgotten. Calhoun approached Webster only in reasoning power, and his acute and subtle logic often vanished into profitless abstractions that came to nothing. He sincerely devoted the best of his life to a pernicious theory of our government, which was refuted by Webster in debate and finally perished by the sword. His only legacy to his country was one of misfortune and disaster. Pinkney, who gave place to Webster as the first orator at the bar, has no title to be compared with him in genius. He left little permanent impression upon our law, and none upon our politics or literature. Choate was oriental, a child of the sun. In richness of fancy and wealth of ornament there is no other like him. He seemed to possess a supernatural power of fascination, but the swarming exuberance of his Asiatic imagination impaired the effect justly due to his great powers. In Choate's style is the gorgeous beauty of a tropical garden, in Webster's the simple dignity and massive strength of the oak. Splendid as Choate's greatest addresses are, they have never taken hold upon the public, nor found a permanent place in literature. The polished elegance of Everett, the consuming fire of Wendell Phillips, the unerring logic and prophetic forecast of Lincoln's speeches of 1858, are among the highest ex-

amples of American oratory; and there are a few scenes in our history — Washington resigning command of the army, Lincoln at Gettysburg — where the grandeur of the occasion contributed to raise human speech to the level of the sublime. Leaving these inspired utterances apart, Webster must be awarded the first place among American orators.

Of the Englishmen, Fox was the great debater; but his speeches, as he said, are not readable, and they were not usually convincing. Chatham survives only in a few great and brilliant fragments. Burke was much more than an orator. His imperial genius ranged over the whole domain of politics, philosophy, and letters. "Out of Burke," said Choate, in one of his characteristic bursts of playful extravagance, "might be cut 50 McIntoshes, 175 Macaulays, 40 Jeffreys, 250 Sir Robert Peels, and leave him greater than Pitt and Fox together." Macaulay accounted him, in breadth of comprehension and richness of imagination, the first orator of the world, and declared the Nabob speech to be "unmatched in the literature of eloquence." Yet Burke was not greatest as an orator. The best of his speeches are splendid essays. With a vaster breadth of intellect and depth of moral power than Webster, before an audience he was often theatrical and declamatory, and usually ineffective. If Webster could not have made Burke's greatest speech, it is not because it was beyond his powers, but because he was incapable of its faults. In oratory, Burke cannot be held his superior.

No just or instructive parallel can be drawn between Webster's oratory and that of the Greeks or Romans. For such a comparison there must be a similarity of conditions. We cannot conceive what Webster might have been in the Areopagus, or Cicero before the American senate. Oratory takes its character from the genius of the race which produces it. Every orator is the product of his own times. The style and standards of public speech are constantly

changing, even among the same people. That which makes a profound impression on one generation may be lightly regarded by the next. The actual effectiveness of oratory, as the art of persuasion by speech, is a principal test of its merit. Enduring beauty of form is another. Webster actually accomplished more for his country by his powers of speech than Cicero for Rome, or Demosthenes for Athens. As literature, his greatest productions are not less worthy than theirs to stand as models of eloquence. But these comparisons, if just, are of little value. It is idle to weigh one great genius in the balance against another: they differ as one star differeth from another star in glory.

Perhaps the most remarkable quality of Webster's oratory, in view of its volume and variety, is its uniform purity of style. He was before the Congress, the courts, and the people for twoscore years. He usually spoke under circumstances not admitting of previous composition; and his style, at least, was extemporaneous. He was not so far superior to others as to be always at his best: there is proof enough that on occasions he was heavy and disappointed his audience. But he was never trivial, never involved or obscure, hardly ever commonplace. He was accustomed to deal with issues that did not admit of trifling; and his unerring taste, one element of his genius, instinctively rejected everything beneath the level of the subject or the occasion. Some of his speeches betray a fondness for Latin quotation, possibly accounted for by a letter to his son, in which he says: "If a man can gracefully and without the air of a pedant show a little more knowledge than the occasion requires, the world will give him credit for eminent attainments. It is an honest quackery. I have practised it, sometimes with success." No man of his time was more engaged in controversy, often under circumstances of great excitement: but he never forgot the decorum of debate, and when he unbent his accustomed dignity, which

was not often, he rarely gave offence or betrayed any weakness in his argument. One or two examples will show the extreme limit of his departures from the "superb propriety" which characterized him. In the debate of 1838 on the sub-treasury, to Calhoun, when he threatened to "carry the war into Africa," Webster retorted: "As I recollect it, when Scipio resolved upon carrying the war into Africa, Hannibal was not at home. Now, sir, I am very little like Hannibal, but I am at home; and when Scipio Africanus South Caroliniensis brings the war into my territories, I shall not leave their defence to Asdrubal, nor Syphax, nor anybody else. I meet him on the shore at his landing, and propose but one contest." To his Marshfield neighbors in 1848 he said, of the New England politicians who had abandoned Van Buren to support Polk: "I think that 'doughface' is an epithet not sufficiently reproachful. Such persons are doughfaces, with dough heads and dough hearts and dough souls. They are all dough; the coarsest potter may mould them to vessels of dishonor." He had a lofty and caustic satire, sharply edged with humor; and he well understood that no weapon in the armory of speech is more deadly than ridicule, judiciously employed. The reply to Hayne bears witness of this. Perhaps the bursts of patriotic eloquence in that great speech were not more effective in carrying the country than the exquisite badinage of the parley before the Charleston custom-house. At one stroke, it turned the champion and the cause of nullification into inextinguishable laughter.

On common occasions Webster was unimpassioned, but never empty. His words always had weight and meaning. Under inspiration of a great theme, he rose to a grandeur of diction and imagery that moves like the verse of Milton. In the excitement of debate, he trampled down all obstacles "like a mammoth in a cane-brake." On the critical and momentous occasions that broke up the fountains of the great

deep within him, there is in his speech a massing of forces, an irresistible weight of advance, an overwhelming rush and sweep of assault, that stirs the blood like the movement of an embattled host. Such an occasion was the reply to Hayne, when words were deeds, eloquence rose to the dignity of action, and history turned upon the event of a single speech.

A just estimate of Webster must regard not only the form, but the amount and varied character, of his oratory and the effects which it produced. For style, compass, variety, and achievement, taken together, Webster stands alone. In each of the principal fields of eloquence, forensic, parliamentary, and occasional or popular, his supremacy is without dispute. He is almost the only example of an orator who invaded and conquered every province of the art, and in none is his style corrupted or his force impaired by the habits of another. His speeches to the court or jury are the perfection of advocacy. There is no declamation, no excess of ornament, no appeal to passion, nothing but the "clearness, force, and earnestness" which he declared to be the qualities that produce conviction, blended with an eloquence that burns only to illuminate the argument. The combination made him well-nigh irresistible. "Whom shall I retain against Webster?" asked an anxious litigant who had been too late to secure him. "Send to South America," was the reply, "and import an earthquake." His congressional speeches are distinguished by breadth of view, a luminous clearness of statement and persuasive force, and an intellectual supremacy, entitling them to the highest place among the great examples of parliamentary eloquence. Before a popular or occasional assembly he was as though he had never addressed any other. No trace of the lawyer or parliamentarian is betrayed in the simple directness with which he spoke to an audience of his fellow-citizens, or in the lofty and impassioned eloquence commemorating some great national event, which itself became an event of national significance.

Webster's greatest speeches have the indefinable quality of permanence. It is not easy to resolve the genius of oratory into its elements, or to say, of two examples which make an equal impression at the moment, why one survives while the other is forgotten. " He is an orator," said Webster, "who can make me think as he thinks and feel as he feels." This is persuasion, the first aim of oratory; but this is not the true aseptic that keeps it alive. Some of the most effective speeches at the moment are wholly unfit for the cold immortality of print, and have no lasting merit as literature. For the best portrayal of the eloquence that endures, we must again turn to Webster himself: —

> " True eloquence does not consist in speech. It cannot be brought from far. Labor and learning may toil for it, but they will toil in vain. Words and phrases may be marshalled in every way, but they cannot compass it. It must exist in the man, in the subject, and in the occasion. Affected passion, intense expression, the pomp of declamation, all may aspire to it: they cannot reach it. It comes, if it come at all, like the outbreaking of a fountain from the earth, or the bursting forth of volcanic fires, with spontaneous, original, native force."

Such was the eloquence of Webster. Opportunity favored him, no less than nature. He brought to the great issues and great occasions with which he had to deal a genius which has made his speeches classic among his countymen, and fit to be read and remembered wherever homage is paid to the great masters of speech.

It is easy to fall into the error of overestimating a public character. No vice is more common, or more unworthy of intelligent minds, than indiscriminate eulogy. The eager crowd sets up idols of clay, and awards immortality to personages who will be forgotten by the next generation; unmindful that there is no title to permanent fame except in great

public services to a nation, a race, or to mankind. Can Webster's claim be submitted to this test? The highest rank in oratory must be awarded to that which draws after it the greatest and most lasting results. A speech, however admirable in form, that reaches no farther than the next verdict, or the next election, cannot be classed with the great utterances that settle a principle of government or direct the thought of a nation. Viewed in the light of what he actually accomplished by the power of eloquence, Webster may be accounted first among the great orators of history. It may be that the Union stands to-day a monument to his compelling genius. He devoted the best of his life and his transcendent powers to nationalize the people of the states. In his inmost soul he believed that the mighty experiment of free institutions was staked upon the perpetuity of the American Union. The theme took possession of him. He proclaimed the destiny of a great and united nation, devoting a continent to civil and religious freedom, and leading the way to the universal emancipation of mankind, in words that burned into the hearts of his countrymen, until a barren political conception became a living reality, and the Union stood personified as the embodiment of all their hopes and aspirations. He inspired them with his own faith ; and, long after he had mouldered into dust, it was to his step that they marched in defence of the Union, and his faith that they sealed with their blood.

No monuments of the language or literature of a race are more likely to survive than the utterances of its great orators. From the wreck of ancient states there have come down to us a few masterpieces of eloquence. Their matchless beauty and perfection of style is the admiration of scholars, but we look to them in vain for the creative energy that inspires great and momentous events. If such as these have survived for twenty centuries, what remains for the orator who touched the hearts of millions to the issue of nationality? At a distance of but

fifty years from Webster's death, it is not yet time to assign his permanent place in the remembrance of mankind, or predict for him an immortality rarely achieved and rarely merited in this world. Yet there is something in the inspired utterances of patriotism and eloquence that prevails over time; and if imagination may forecast the distant age when new dynasties have circled the earth, when our history moulders in libraries, and even our language is merged in a universal tongue, the curious antiquary, exploring the remains of an extinct literature for the origin and genius of free institutions, may catch a glimpse of this majestic figure outlined against the background of the centuries, and an echo of the voice that rallied a nation to the call of "Liberty and Union, one and inseparable."

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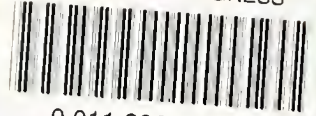
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